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EQUALITY OF NATIONAL MINORITIES IN YUGOSLAVIA

Following is the translation of an article by Alas Bebler in Medjunarodna Politika (International Politics) Vol XI, No 255, Belgrade, 16 November 1960, pages 13-15.

Somewhat over 2 million, or 12%, of the 18-million inhabitants of Yugoslavia are members of national minorities. This means that their native tongue is not one of the languages spoken by the Southern Slav peoples of the Yugoslav Federation -- the Serbs, Croats, Slovenes, Macedonians, and Montenegrins (i.e., Serbo-Croatian, Slovene, and Macedonian). The members of the minorities are divided into a number of larger and smaller linguistic groups. The latest population census in 1953 gave the following statistics: Albanians 754,000, Hungarians 502,000, Turks 260,000, Slovaks 85,000, Bulgarians 62,000, Rumanians 60,000, Ruthenians 37,000, Italians 36,000, Czechs 35,000, Russians 12,000, and a further series of smaller groups or persons of undetermined nationality.

Because of their total number, the problem of relationship toward these minorities is not an insignificant one; for a number of reasons it is also quite a complex one. Here one must primarily consider differences in language, different degrees of development, etc. Nevertheless, the existence of these minority groups from the very beginning of the formation of New Yugoslavia, i.e., from the end of World War II, has never been a source of serious difficulties for our country, neither from the standpoint of internal unity, nor with regard to her relationship with other countries, thanks to our consistent democratic policy toward these minority groups.

Members of all minority groups without exception are granted all civil rights. The Constitution of 1946, which has never been altered in this respect, states: "All citizens of FNRJ (Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia) are equal before the law and enjoy equal rights irrespective of nationality, race, or religion....Any action which grants special privileges or limits the rights of citizens on the basis of national, racial, or religious hatred and dissension is unconstitutional and punishable by law" (Article 21). "All citizens without regard to sex, nationality, race, religion, degree of education, and place of residence, having reached the age of 18, have the right to elect and be elected into all departments of the national government" (Article 23). "According to law all public offices are accessible" to all (Article 33).

In addition to the above, equality is further ensured for the most

important minority groups, the Albanian and Hungarian, by the fact that the territories which these groups mainly inhabit are autonomous. These consist of the Autonomous Oblast of Kosovo and Metohia and the Autonomous Pokrajina of Vojvodina. These autonomous regions have special representatives in the National Assembly in which each of the six Republics of our Federation has 10 representatives. Thus, Kosovo and Metohia have four, and Vojvodina six, representatives. Both together have, therefore, as many representatives as does each republic. Autonomous units have their own elected bodies of representatives and their own executive committees (and assemblies).

The practical significance of the active and passive vote granted to members of minority groups and of the autonomy given to territories settled by minority groups is most clearly seen in the example of Kosovo and Metohia. Here the minority group, namely the Albanians, forms the majority: the majority of delegates to the body of representatives for Kosovo and Metohia are therefore Albanian, as is the president of the Executive Assembly (Administration).

True to the spirit of complete equality of citizens is the full equality of their languages; consequently, also the languages of the minority groups. We are not familiar with, nor do we recognize, the concept of a state language. The most significant consequence of this attitude from the public and legal standpoint is that every national representative, from opstina assemblyman to national federal delegate, may speak in his native language at sessions of the representative body of which he is a member (the speech naturally being translated afterwards into the language of the majority). Citizens have everywhere the right to use their native language in dealing with administrative authorities and the court. Where members of a minority group form the majority in a given administrative unit, their language is also the official language, in the sense that public administration (of opstina or srez) is conducted in two languages, that of the minority group and that of the majority in the respective republic (Serbo-Croatian, Slovene, or Macedonian), and that all public notices appear in both languages.

In the case of our largest minority, the Albanians, its autonomous administration strongly adheres to the decision of its executive assembly that all legal documents of general character be adopted and published in both languages (Albanian and Serbo-Croatian); both languages are used in debates and notes of sessions of all representative bodies; public notices (names of streets, institutions, etc.) stress two languages; all blank forms and documents appear in two languages; etc.

In some respects our policy toward minority groups goes further than the assurance of the above "classical" rights of minorities. Most important in this regard is the economic assistance given -- via the Federation -- by the advanced parts of the country to the less-developed ones. This affects the minorities to a large extent, particularly the Albanians and Turks, since these are located in the least developed areas. Thus the Social Plan for the period 1957-1961 foresees a sum of 50 billion dinars (about 80 million dollars) guaranteed for the economic investment for Kosovo and Metohia.

These investments are created principally through loans of the Federal investment fund, by the fact that these loans (in the case of Kosovo and Metohia) do not return to the above fund, but to the investment fund of the autonomous oblast for further re-investment. In addition, Kosovo and Metohia enjoy a number of other measures of financial relief and appropriations.

The position of minority groups has changed greatly since the beginning of general acceptance and development of local self-government in Yugoslavia. Members of minority groups very often form the majority in opstine and srezi. The wide powers granted to opstine and srezi enable minority groups to solve their economic, cultural and educational problems themselves, and to carry out their decisions. The significance of this is revealed by the fact that our self-governing units control about 70% of the net national income.

In all countries where minority groups exist the question of their education is an especially sensitive one. Our system of self-government leaves the problem of elementary schools mainly up to the minorities themselves. All minority groups with literary languages and sufficiently dense settlement have their own elementary schools. Among these belong the Albanians, Hungarians, Turks, Slovaks, Rumanians, Bulgarians, Italians, Ruthenians and Czechs. This form of schooling has developed to such an extent in New Yugoslavia that there are now about two and a half times as many students in the elementary schools of minority groups than there were in pre-war Yugoslavia. Albanians, Hungarians, Turks, Slovaks, Rumanians and Italians possess secondary schools; for these minorities there also exist special sections in secondary and vocational schools. Albanian sections exist in the following vocational schools: economic, medical, technical, musical, and mining. Members of minorities receive scholarships for study at higher educational institutions and universities. There are over 1,500 members of minority groups from Kosovo and Metohia holding scholarships at higher educational institutions and universities.

Much effort is expended in publishing for the benefit of minorities, both with regard to the informative press, as well as to text- and other books. Eleven newspapers are published in Albanian, 10 in Hungarian, etc. Almost all radio stations in the country also broadcast in languages of the minorities. All the more important minorities have their cultural-educational associations. This activity naturally depends mainly on the energy and customs of the minority itself. The Czechs, a very literate and lively minority, have organized 31 cultural associations and 51 reading rooms, despite the fact that this minority consists of only 35,000 members.

The languages of minority groups used for instruction in schools and in public life are, in principle, languages of the native countries of the respective minorities, not local dialects. This principle often requires much effort as well as contact with the mother countries. Where possible, young teachers are sent for schooling to the mother country (e.g., Italy) and textbooks are purchased from these countries.

Obviously, minority groups must necessarily also be familiar with the languages of the majorities and all of them desire this, if only for practical reasons. For this reason, the language of the majority in the respective Republics is taught in all minority schools. This practice has

increased the attractiveness of minority schools for parents of the minority group. (Italian schools in the former Zone "B" of the Free Territory of Trieste are an exception, this practice not being permitted under the London Agreement).

With this I have touched upon a controversial issue, namely the right of parents to decide in which language their child is to be educated. In all civilized countries parents are granted the right to decide how and where their child is to be educated: nowhere, however, is this right an absolute one. The curriculum for their children is not decided upon by the parents, but is prescribed by laws and general regulations. The same holds true for our minority groups. The curriculum for minority schools is determined by the same procedure as that of majority groups. The only freedom of choice granted to parents -- and this is a considerable one -- is that in mixed settlements they may send their child to either a minority or majority school. Parents who are members of minority groups are, therefore, not forced to send their children to minority schools. Experience has shown, however, that under our conditions, i.e., in an atmosphere of full and true equality, this freedom is not detrimental to the minority as a collective; it loses nothing because of this. Good proof of this is provided by the example of the mixed Serbo-Croatian-Hungarian district of Subotica. Here, in comparison with pre-war conditions the number of students in Serbo-Croatian schools has doubled (natural increase and immigration), while that in Hungarian schools has tripled, despite the fact that there has been no immigration of Hungarian elements into this area.

A great novelty with respect to relationships toward minority groups has been our partiality to teaching minority languages in majority schools in mixed areas. This tendency gives particularly good results in areas inhabited by Hungarian and Italian minorities. Here the minority language is sometimes even introduced as a subject in elementary schools. In the above-mentioned srez of Subotica, as well as in the srez of Murska Sobota, in addition to pure minority and majority elementary schools, there have been introduced mixed classes, which will lead to the formation of mixed elementary schools. The term "mixed" here signifies that in these schools instruction is given in two languages. The child becomes literate in both Serbo-Croatian (or Slovene) and Hungarian in the first grade of elementary school. Later, all subjects are taught in both languages (some more extensively in one language and less in the other). In secondary schools and schools for teachers of the majority, the minority language (i.e., Hungarian), has been introduced as part of the curriculum and this subject being very well attended.

Our policy toward minorities has yielded excellent results. Because of such a policy our minorities have not been, and are not, "foreign bodies" in the national organism. Their existence and their native cultural life did not, and does not, disunite Yugoslavia, since these minorities do not feel they are in a foreign country, but in one that belongs to them to the same degree as it does to members of the majority. Such a policy -- truly opposed to any policy of oppression or assimilation -- has so strongly linked the minorities to the majority that even in the most trying days

of New Yugoslavia, in the years 1948-53, they have never wavered but stood as firmly behind the leadership of the country as did the majority. Furthermore, they are becoming to an ever greater degree a bridge between our peoples and those of neighbouring countries.

The best example of this is provided by the condition on the Italian-Yugoslav border, one of the most open boundaries in Europe. The Italian minority on our side and the Slovene on the Italian side create the liveliness of traffic for which this border is characteristic. Border authorities register millions of crossings annually. In some sections up to 10 or more buses cross daily, while smaller vehicles line up as if the border were nonexistent. All tension has ceased in the border region. Both languages -- Italian and Slovene -- are heard on both sides of the border, in streets and public places, and both one and the other songs are sung publicly here and there.

All the above-mentioned results of our policy toward minority groups support our conviction that this policy is a correct one. Furthermore, by means of this policy we are fulfilling our democratic obligations toward the minorities themselves, as well as toward other peoples.